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## Beyond the Indicators: An Integrated School-Level Approach to Dropout Prevention

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On June 15, 2009, Martha Abele Mac Iver and Douglas J. Mac Iver presented *Beyond the Indicators: An Integrated School-Level Approach to Dropout Prevention*. In this webinar (and accompanying paper), they explained how to create an integrated dropout prevention strategy and highlighted an innovated pilot program that yielded results within months. They have developed an early warning and tiered response system that combines components of comprehensive school reform with programs targeted on individual students. Here, Douglas Mac Iver and Martha Mac Iver answer questions submitted by webinar participants regarding the development and implementation of an early warning and tiered response system.

### Whole School Reform

- 1) Why is it so important to have a whole school reform in place? Is it possible to just implement targeted interventions focused on students at risk of dropping out?

Whole school reform is the counterpart to preventative measures in public health. We want to prevent problems from arising so that we only have to intervene for a manageable subset of students. Whole school reform does not necessarily mean a particular whole school reform model but a set of integrated instructional and administrative best practices (including coherent well-articulated instructional programs, curriculum-specific professional development, teacher coaching, and positive school climate building measures) that are carried out throughout the school to assure excellent standards-based instruction in every classroom, every day. If schools do not focus first on providing a strong instructional foundation, there will simply be so many students needing intervention that it may be impossible to meet all their needs.

### Limited Resources

- 2) What if my district doesn't have the resources to engage in comprehensive school reform?

It is not necessary to hire external comprehensive school reform providers. The central office itself can be organized to support and promote whole school reform. It is less about the level of resources than about how they are used—district resources must be focused on helping schools implement an integrated set of instructional and administrative best practices.

- 3) How can this early warning and tiered response system be implemented in districts, including small rural districts, with limited human and financial resources?

Districts with limited human and financial resources can develop an early warning system with tiered interventions. At its most basic level, it requires keeping track of course grades, attendance, and behavior. In every district, teachers keep track of their students' course grades and attendance. It is not onerous or expensive to have teachers also assign a student behavior grade (excellent, satisfactory, or unsatisfactory) in each course. To run an early warning system, it is important that teachers have shared access to this data. Teachers at schools without computerized data systems can still have productive early warning meetings by having the data in their grade books and then by bringing their grade books to meetings. During said meetings, the team can use this data to first create a master list of students that are failing, not attending, or with unsatisfactory behavior. Then they can identify the additional supports each individual student might need and determine how the team can best provide those supports themselves or with the help of other staff or volunteers. The implementation of this type of model is especially important in districts with limited resources since the semi-monthly data- and support-focused meetings help the school use their resources strategically, focusing on the students who need extra supports the most.

- 4) Considering the data-intensive nature of intervention, what recommendation can you make for small rural districts with limited human and financial resources?

As the answer to question #3 indicated, the Early Warning Indicator model can be followed in districts without fancy data systems. In addition, these districts might consider adopting one of the many flexible, inexpensive, and secure web-based systems now available (such as SnapGrades).

### Other Possible Early Indicators

- 5) Are some indicators more predictive of dropping out than others?

Course failure (particularly in 9<sup>th</sup> grade) is particularly important because there is a causal connection between failure, falling behind in the number of credits required for graduation, and failing to graduate. While this seems obvious, most schools and districts do not intervene to prevent course failure and have inadequate responses to help students recover credits not earned when they fail a course. Course failure is itself linked to attendance, but there are numerous students with relatively good attendance

who still fail courses (often because of low academic skill levels). Chronic absenteeism prior to a student reaching high school is also highly predictive of eventual drop out, a process that begins with missing school, then missing more and more school over time, until students finally stop coming altogether. Intervening to increase attendance rates in middle school is of crucial importance.

- 6) In several reports by Robert Balfanz and others, the emphasis shifts back and forth between suspensions and grades for class behavior. Please comment on how you recommend looking at both of these factors in a school.

Some districts do not record grades for class behavior, but all record suspensions. In our work in Philadelphia, data on both behavior and suspensions were available so we used both. Poor behavior grades were much more common than suspensions, so they identified a higher number of potential dropouts. Suspensions were a stronger predictor of dropping out, but they identified fewer potential dropouts (many more students dropped out than were ever suspended). If behavior grades are available, we recommend paying close attention to them as well as suspensions, and use both to flag students for intervention. When behavior grades are not available but negative behavior comments are recorded on students' report cards, these comments can be used as an early warning indicator. For example, Feltonville flags any student who receives three or more negative behavior comments on a report card for additional support.

- 7) Are there early warning indicators at the elementary level?

The same early warning indicators (chronic absenteeism, behavior problems, course failure) are important at the elementary level, although most dropouts do not show signs this early. Intervening when these indicators manifest themselves is crucial at the elementary level, but a focus just at the elementary level will not solve the problem for those who manifest the indicators later.

### Other Topics

- 8) A number of organizations have developed dropout indicators. How similar or different are these approaches?

One important distinction is between demographic and family background predictors of dropping out, and behavioral indicators (attendance, behavior problems, course failure). Our work focuses on behavioral indicators, which school level interventions can actually prevent. Many of the recent reports that focus on behavioral indicators are based on the early work of researchers at Johns Hopkins and the Consortium on Chicago School Research (even when they do not cite the sources). Our work also sought to identify a small number of the best indicators, which were both highly predictive of dropout

outcomes and also identified a relatively large group of students at risk for dropping out.

- 9) Can you comment on the cultural competency of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)? In some diverse districts, PBIS has been ineffective. Please address issues of diverse experiences and diverse needs in relation to student engagement.

We are not necessarily endorsing PBIS, but mention it as a particular example of a schoolwide program focused on behavior. Other districts might want to build their schoolwide approach around “Judicious Discipline” or “Discipline with Dignity” or some other program. The point is to have a schoolwide approach that is successful in preventing problem behaviors.

We also recommend the following websites as useful in addressing this question.

<http://www.swpbs.org/module/cultural.html#what>

[http://www.pbis.org/common/pbisresources/presentations/A8\\_JMathewsJohnson.ppt#256,1,Cultural Fit Within a School-wide System of PBIS: Universal and Secondary Examples](http://www.pbis.org/common/pbisresources/presentations/A8_JMathewsJohnson.ppt#256,1,Cultural Fit Within a School-wide System of PBIS: Universal and Secondary Examples)

- 10) As a charter high school that does not have access to students in middle school, how can we intervene effectively?

It is important to gather data on all incoming students as early as possible so that students with early warning indicators (problems in attendance, discipline, course failure or low basic skill levels) can be identified prior to the beginning of school. Often times, data on incoming students can be obtained from the district. Charter high schools can then reach out to students with chronic attendance problems or provide an intensive summer bridge program for students with low middle school achievement. If data are not available, the charter high school needs to be organized to respond within the first weeks of school to all absences and misbehavior. It is crucial to have an interim reporting system in place by the end of the first month of school that identifies students at risk of course failure so interventions can be implemented to prevent course failure. In addition, the school needs an effective plan for helping students recover lost credits (e.g., after school/evenings).